

Record of Decision and Establishment Order

Establishment of Haystack Rock and Horse Pasture Ridge Research Natural Areas (Lower Joseph Creek Restoration Project)

Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan Amendment Number 47

USDA Forest Service Pacific Northwest Region

Wallowa Valley Ranger District, Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Wallowa County, Oregon

Haystack Rock proposed Research Natural Area: T4N R45E sections 7, 8, 17, and 18
Horse Pasture Ridge proposed Research Natural Area: T5N R45E section 28

Decision and Reason for the Decision

Background

In the interest of landscape learning and streamlining NEPA, establishment of two Research Natural Areas (RNAs) was analyzed as part of the Lower Joseph Creek Restoration Project (LJCRP) Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS). Research Natural Areas are designated for research and educational opportunities, to maintain biological diversity on National Forest System lands, and are selected to complete a national network of ecological areas. The Horse Pasture Ridge (338 acres) and Haystack Rock (425 acres) RNAs were proposed for establishment in the 1990 Wallowa-Whitman National Forest (WWNF) Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). Both are within the Lower Joseph Creek Restoration Project area and each still maintains all the qualities unique for RNA designation. The establishment of the two RNAs requires a forest plan amendment, as described below. Research Natural Area establishment was proposed under both action alternatives of the LJCRP FEIS. The LJCRP FEIS also documents the analysis of effects of a no action alternative which did not include establishment of the two RNAs.

Decision and Rationale

Based upon my review of all alternatives, I have decided to establish the Horse Pasture Ridge and Haystack Rock RNAs, as considered in Alternatives 2 and 3 of the LJCRP FEIS (FEIS page 141). I am also approving a forest plan amendment, which is required to establish RNAs. The objective is to maintain the natural condition of the areas; therefore no forest products or minerals would be removed, livestock grazing patterns would not be changed, fire activity would be limited to suppression only (unless fire is part of an approved research project), off road vehicles would be excluded, and recreation use would be managed at a low intensity level. Environmental consequences disclosed in the WWNF Forest Plan FEIS are still valid, and conditions and effects have not changed. Management strategies would not change under the establishment, and no adverse or irreversible environmental consequences are expected.

WWNF Forest Plan objectives for establishing RNAs are to preserve examples of all significant natural ecosystems for comparison with those influenced by humans, to provide educational and research areas for ecological and environmental studies; and to preserve gene pools for typical and rare and endangered plants and animals (Forest Plan page 4-83). RNAs typify important forest, shrubland, grassland, alpine, aquatic, and geologic types and other natural situations that have special and unique characteristics of scientific interest and importance. The Horse Pasture Ridge RNA will contribute to the national network of RNAs by providing an example of Idaho fescue-prairie Junegrass, and Idaho fescue-blue bunch wheatgrass plant associations in ridge top communities. The Haystack Rock RNA will contribute to the national network of RNAs by providing an example of Idaho fescue-blue bunch wheatgrass-arrow leaf balsamroot and blue bunch wheatgrass-Sandberg's bluegrass-narrow-leaved skullcap plant associations. Both Haystack Rock and Horse Pasture Ridge RNAs will serve as untreated baseline study areas with respect to prescribed fire and other management activities (FEIS page 67).

In addition to meeting Forest Plan objectives, establishing these RNAs meets agency objectives including (1) maintaining representative areas of high quality ecosystem; (2) preserving and maintaining genetic diversity, including threatened, endangered, and sensitive species; (3) protecting areas against human-caused environmental disruptions; (4) serving as reference areas for study of ecological processes; (5) providing onsite and extension educational activities; (6) serving as baseline areas for measuring long-term ecological change; (7) serving as control areas for comparing results from manipulative research; and (8) monitoring effects of resource management techniques and practices (FSM 4063.02).

Under the Forest Plan, activities in RNAs are limited to research, study, observations, monitoring, and educational activities that are nondestructive and non-manipulative. Proposed RNAs are protected from uses which would reduce their suitability for RNA designation. Since both Horse Pasture Ridge and Haystack Rock were proposed under the Forest Plan (page 4-84) there will be no changes in management as a result of establishment.

This decision requires a forest plan amendment (FSM 4063.03). This decision amends the WWNF Forest Plan in conformance with the 1982 Planning Rule process¹, following Forest Service Manual direction (FSM 1926.51 - January 31, 2006), changing the designation of the Horse Pasture Ridge and Haystack Rock RNAs from "proposed" to "established" (Forest Plan page 4-82). The significance of the amendment was evaluated in accordance with FSM 1926.51 and FSM 1926.52, and found to be non-

¹ Forest Service Handbook 1909.12 – Land Management Planning Handbook Chapter 20 – Land Management Plan states: *Plan amendments started after May 9, 2015, must conform to the 2012 Planning Rule requirements. Before that date, plan amendments may be made following the 1982 Rule process or following the 2012 Planning Rule. (36 CFR§219.17(b)(2)).* This proposed action was developed and scoped prior to May 9, 2015. The Responsible Official has elected to follow the 1982 Planning Rule procedures for purposes of making this amendment.

significant according to this policy. The amendment will not alter multiple-use forest plan goals and objectives or adjust management area boundaries. The amendment will not alter the long-term relationship between levels of multiple-use goods and services originally projected for the WWNF, nor will it alter timber suitability. The amendment will not result in an important effect to the entire land management planning area. (See project record for details of evaluation). Opportunities for public participation and notification were provided as required.

In addition to my decision to amend the WWNF Forest Plan, an establishment record (see attached) has been prepared for each RNA for approval by the R6 Regional Forester with the concurrence of the PNW Station Director (FSM 4063.04b). A legal description, and land lines where Haystack Rock and Horse Pasture Ridge have boundaries in common with other landowners will be documented (FSM 4063.37) as a part of the establishment record process.

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, I also considered the no action alternative (LJCRP FEIS Alternative 1). A more detailed comparison of the effects of RNA establishment can be found on pages 73-75 in Chapter 3 of the LJCRP FEIS.

Alternative 1 – No Action

Under the no-action alternative, current management plans would continue to guide management of the project area. Under Alternative 1, the Horse Pasture Ridge and Haystack Rock proposed RNAs would remain as proposed RNAs and continue to be protected from uses that would reduce suitability for RNA designation. This management direction is listed in the WWNF Forest Plan, Pages 4-84 and 4-85, and would remain in effect until there is a revised Forest Plan or there is an amendment to this portion of the Forest Plan.

Public Involvement

The Notice of Intent to develop the LJCRP EIS was published in the Federal Register on January 9, 2014, and a legal notice of the comment period was published in the Baker City Herald. The Notice of Availability (NOA) of the DEIS for a 90 day comment period was published in the Federal Register, and Baker City Herald on November 14, 2014. The DEIS comment period ended on February 12, 2015.

Fifteen public meetings organized by the Wallowa-Whitman Forest Collaborative between August 2013 and August 2015 in-part focused on scoping results, methodologies used in alternative development, effects analyses, and collaborative consensus around RNA establishment and other project activities. Twelve meetings and conference calls, in addition to the joint public meetings in January and December 2014, were held with the Wallowa County Natural Resources Advisory Council to discuss the proposed action, public comments, planning issues and alternatives, and effects analyses, including those related to RNA establishment.

Two public field trips organized by the Wallowa-Whitman Forest Collaborative were held in the project area in August 2013 and June 2014, and two meetings with local permittees were held during development of the EIS. Public scoping did not identify RNA establishment as a significant issue. There were five comments submitted during scoping that were in favor of RNA establishment and two comments opposed to RNA establishment. Comments on the DEIS included two favorable comments regarding RNA establishment. For more information, see the analysis of public scoping in the project record.

Nez Perce Tribe Consultation and Coordination

More than 20 meetings and conference calls, and five field trips were held with the Nez Perce Tribe staff throughout the LJCRP planning process. Government-to-government meetings were held in July, 2014 and June, 2015. Detailed information on meetings and field trips with the Nez Perce Tribe is located in Appendix G of the LJCRP FEIS. The tribe strongly supported the establishment of Haystack Rock and Horse Pasture Ridge RNAs.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

This decision to establish Haystack Rock and Horse Pasture Ridge RNAs is consistent with the intent of the WWNF Forest Plan's long term goals and objectives, including forest management goals for research (Forest Plan page 4-12) and specific direction for Management Area 12 – Research Natural Areas (pages 4-84 and 4-85). Establishment of research natural areas has been sanctioned in regulations at 7 CFR §2.60(a) and 36 CFR §251.23, and 36 CFR §219.25 (1982, 1983). Direction for establishment is provided in Forest Service Manual 4063 and in “A Guide for Developing Natural Area Management and Monitoring Plans” written by the Pacific Northwest Interagency Natural Area Committee.

Environmentally Preferable Alternative

Alternative 2 (Modified Proposed Action) is the environmentally preferable alternative, because it would result in the least harm to the biological and physical environment, and best protects and preserves historic, cultural, and natural resources. This alternative provides the most long-term benefits for multiple resources.

Administrative Review or Objection Opportunities

This decision is subject to objection pursuant to procedures at 36 CFR 219 Subpart B. Public notice for the beginning of the objection period was made available following requirements at 36 CFR §219.52. A legal notice published in The Oregonian on July 15, 2016 began the 60-day objection period. The legal notice, as well as a “Dear Reader” letter circulated with the Final EIS, provided instructions for filing an objection with the reviewing officer. No objections were received. When no objection is filed, implementation may begin on, but no sooner than the fifth business day following the end of the 60-day objection filing period (§219.52).

Implementation

Implementation may begin immediately.

Contact Person

For additional information concerning this draft decision and the final environmental impact statement, please contact Dea Nelson, Environmental Coordinator & Planner, Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, by phone: 541-523-1216 or email: dnelson09@fs.fed.us.



JAMES M. PEÑA
Regional Forester

4.17.17

Date

Attached: Establishment Orders and Establishment Records for Haystack Rock and Horse Pasture Ridge RNAs

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